Digital Storytelling

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Digital storytelling is a form of short narrative, usually a personal narrative told in the first person, presented as a short movie for display in a television or computer monitor or projected onto a screen (Ohler, 2005). Robin (2008) suggests that at its core, digital storytelling allows computer users to become creative storytellers through the traditional process of selecting a topic, conducting some research, writing a script, and developing an interesting story. This material is then combined with various types of multimedia, including computer-based graphics, recorded audio, computer-generated text, video clips, and music so that it can be played on a computer, uploaded on a web site, or burned on a DVD (Robin, 2008).

The digital story genre has become associated with a specific style of popular media work developed in California in the early 1990s (Fletcher & Cambre, 2009). Fletcher and Cambre (2009) propose that it was during this time that a small group of visual artists, designers, performers, and videographers became interested in fostering the production and dissemination of personal stories, marginal histories and counter narratives in the emerging social space of the World Wide Web. Members of this group ultimately formed the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) a nonprofit community arts organization (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2011, Inspiration, ¶ 1). Since the early 1990s, the CDS has provided training and assistance to people interested in creating and sharing their personal narratives (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2011, How the Center for Digital Storytelling Came to Be, ¶ 3).

Robin (2008) states that the CDS is continually impressed by how easy it is for average people to create their digital stories in a really powerful way, in a relatively short amount of time, for a relatively small amount of money. The tools needed for digital storytelling (computers, scanners, digital cameras, and high-quality digital audio capture devices) have become increasingly more affordable and accessible. Robin (2008) also suggests that the combination of powerful, yet affordable, technology hardware and software meshes perfectly with the needs of many of today’s classrooms, where the focus is on providing students with the skills they will need to “thrive in increasingly media-varied environments”.

Mullen and Wedwick (2008) advise that there are a variety of free computer programs which can be used in the classroom to create digital stories. These free computer programs are either preloaded on the school’s computer or available for free download on the internet. Microsoft Movie Maker and Microsoft Photo Story 3 are an example of two video-editing programs that are available for free download on any computer running Microsoft XP or higher. Mullen and Wedwick (2008) add that both of these programs run similarly to other Microsoft Office programs such as Word or Publisher, and Microsoft has excellent tutorial web sites with quality user instructions.

An additional computer program that is available free for download on the internet is called Audacity (Mullen & Wedwick, 2008). Audacity is a free audio-editing program which enables students to record and edit narration for their digital story. Although Audacity is a free computer program, it might be necessary to purchase a computer microphone to record the audio (Mullen & Wedwick, 2008).

Mullen and Wedwick (2008) also suggest that when students are creating their digital stories, they search the internet for free pictures and videos. The internet is filled with a plethora of free pictures and videos that students can use to enrich their digital stories. Robin (2008) includes that integrating visual images with written text both enhances and accelerates student comprehension, and digital storytelling is an especially good technology tool for collecting, creating, analyzing, and combining visual images with written text.

Although adding pictures and videos are a great way to make a digital story visually appealing, Mullen and Wedwick (2008) imply that digital storytelling is not simply narrating a set of pictures. It is the process of using words and pictures to tell a story. Ohler (2005) suggests that when using digital storytelling, it is important for students to focus on the story first and the digital medium second; otherwise, the stories can be weak and overpowered by the technology.

Ohler (2005) indicates that for many students their focus is on the power of the technology rather than the power of their stories. Students are often more engaged in creating the digital medium at the expense of the message, producing a technical event rather than a story (Ohler, 2005). Teachers instructing digital storytelling in their classrooms should teach students how to be storytellers. Teachers can do this by having students create a story map first and then have students practice their written and oral storytelling; all before bringing in digital elements (Ohler, 2005).

A story map is a one-page diagram showing how the essential components of a story are incorporated into the overall flow of the narrative (Ohler, 2005). While creating a story map, students are to think about their stories in terms of theme and character development rather than simply as a series of events. In addition, story maps also enable teachers to quickly assess the strength of a story while it is still in the planning stage and to challenge students to strengthen weak story elements (Ohler, 2005).

Ohler (2005) suggests that although the nature and structure of the student’s individual digital stories will differ, typically all stories are made up of the following three components: a call to adventure, problem-solution involving transformation, and closure. A digital story will begin with a call to adventure where the main character’s normal life is interrupted by a significant event, initiating a physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual journey (Ohler, 2005). Next, in the problem-solution involving transformation phase, the main character encounters a problem that needs to be solved through a personal transformation of some kind. Finally, closure will involve the main character’s realization of something significant, a moral, or evidence that something or someone has changed. A digital story must incorporate all three of these components to be a compelling story (Ohler, 2005).

Once the story mapping has been completed, students need to focus on the creation of their written scripts. Ohler (2005) advocates that students spend as much time as possible creating and editing their written and oral scripts before recording their digital stories. These scripts are the most important tool used in the creation of a student’s digital story because they bring their digital story to life. Depending on the students’ choice, the final written script could be well-crafted bullets, a complete narrative, or a finely edited script (Ohler, 2005). Students may also choose to orally record their script. Oral storytelling is a powerful way for students to develop their own voices and discover what events and details are essential to their stories (Ohler, 2005).

Digital storytelling is used to strengthen students’ critical thinking, report writing, and media literacy skills (Ohler, 2005). But in order for digital stories to be relevant in all content areas, the digital stories need to be tied into the curriculum. Ohler (2005) advocates for digital storytelling be used in all content areas so that students are able to combine storytelling, critical thinking, and report writing. While students are creating and presenting their digital stories, it is the teacher’s responsibility to keep the class in line with the curriculum. Ohler (2005) suggests that educators think in terms of a continuum anchored by “story” on one end and “analytical report” on the other, and to aim for the middle.

Story problems are a part of most mathematics curricula and are sometimes used as writing exercises in mathematics classrooms (Gould & Schmidt, 2010). Gould and Schmidt (2010) indicate that story problems usually appear at the end of the instructional units in mathematics textbooks and are just one of the students’ least favorite problems to complete. A reason as to why students might show displeasure in solving story problems is because they cannot connect the textbook examples to the story problems that occur in their everyday lives. Gould and Schmidt (2010) suggested that by having students create a mathematical digital story about a story problem they wrote on their own, it might help students discover how mathematics is used outside of the classroom, as well as a new appreciation for story problems.

Students enrolled in Gould’s geometry classes were given six full class periods, as well as time outside class, during study halls, and before and after school, to work in the school’s computer lab to create digital stories about a story problem they created (Gould & Schmidt, 2010). The students were required to produce digital trigonometry story problems by situating their problems within real-life scenarios (Gould & Schmidt, 2010). Unlike the textbook story problems, students were asked to bring their digital trigonometry story problems to life by including video or sill pictures and a recorded narration that told the problem’s story (Gould & Schmidt, 2010).

Of all the students’ digital trigonometry story problems that were created in Gould’s classes, one stood out from the rest. Two students, both of which were members of the school’s swim team, began their digital story with the two students arguing about who got a better start off the blocks during a race (Gould & Schmidt, 2010). It was this argument that evolved into an attempt to prove who really had a better start off the blocks by using trigonometry in a real-life scenario (Gould & Schmidt, 2010).

Throughout the digital story the students provided video of the race, as well as still pictures of the students diving off the swim blocks, with trigonometry symbols and measurements overlapped (Gould & Schmidt, 2010). The videos and still pictures provided useful information for solving the problem of which student had the better start. The digital story then concludes with the group providing how their problem was solved, the trigonometry equations that were used, and the results as to which swim team member had a better start off the blocks (Gould & Schmidt, 2010).

By having students create digital stories about how trigonometry fit into real-life situations in their own lives, it helped students answer that commonly asked question of, “When are we ever going to use this?”. The real-life settings and the stories told captured students’ attention and held it (Gould & Schmidt, 2010). Gould and Schmidt (2010) recommend digital storytelling in all classrooms, even in a mathematics class, so that students can take responsibility for their own learning by expressing their individual creativity.

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